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SUBJECT: NEW INTERIOR DEPMIN TO FOCUS ON LEGAL IMMIGRATION AND
DECENTRALIZATION

REF: ATHENS 1547

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: New Interior DepMin Tzakri expects to be given national policy responsibility for integration of immigrants as well as regional responsibility for legal immigration, implementation of new decentralization initiatives, and general administration. Her role and duties will be defined formally by government decree in the coming weeks. Contrary to her public image, Tzakri proved smart, focused, well informed, and capable. She stated that her door was open at all times for any issue the CG wished to raise and expressed enthusiasm for working with the USG on matters of mutual interest, such as enhancing cooperation among countries in the region on immigration issues. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Consul General paid an initial courtesy call on Thessaloniki-based Deputy Minister of Interior, Decentralization and E-Governance Theodora Tzakri on 23 November. [NOTE: Tzakri's position and the parallel Deputy Minister for Economy, Competitiveness and Marine affairs were established in Thessaloniki in October by the incoming PASOK Government to absorb many of the roles previously performed by the now-defunct Ministry for Macedonia and Thrace. See reftel for further details on post-election ministerial restructuring. END NOTE.] CG expressed USG interest in working closely and cooperatively with Tzakri and her staff and inquired about her expected portfolio, new Ministry policy on immigration issues and planned administrative reforms.

13. (SBU) STRUCTURE/PORTFOLIO: DepMin Tzakri stated that currently, her offices and staff are comprised of the same Directorates and positions inherited from the recently eliminated Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace. However, these structures will change upon signature of a GoG decree in the coming weeks which will specify the new authorities and responsibilities of her position. Following the issuance of that decree, she anticipates an internal reshuffle involving the closing and/or reorganization of certain Directorates and the possible creation of additional ones. However, Tzakri was disciplined about providing details before the decree language had been finalized. She did state that she had specifically requested to be given national-level responsibility for policy on integration of legal immigrants and expected this request to be honored.

14. (SBU) IMMIGRATION: Tzakri confirmed that the GoG had decided to give Interior responsibility for legal immigration and made clear that illegal immigration now fell within the purview of the new Ministry for Citizens' Protection (formerly Public Order). With regard to her personal priorities in this field, she stressed that it was imperative that the integration of legal immigrants into Greek society be facilitated by the GoG, as immigrants' contribution to all aspects of public life was "undisputed." She revealed that among several pieces of legislation currently under development was a bill that would grant voting rights in local elections to second-generation immigrants and third-country nationals with stable and documented relations with Greece. Since the legislation is still being drafted, Tsakri was unable to provide specific details on the criteria for receiving such voting rights, but anticipated that Amcit spouses of Greek citizens residing permanently in Greece would qualify. She reported that the GoG planned to pass the legislation by Spring 2010 so that it could be implemented in the Fall 2010 local elections. Asked about potential popular reaction to the measure, Tzakri stated she was confident that the bulk of the electorate was "mature" and would back the decision. She did anticipate a few extreme reactions from far right wing parties, but believed they "would certainly not be able to turn the tide."

15. (SBU) CG noted that police, coast guard, military, and port officials from Northern Greece all had expressed interest to her in improving cooperation with their counterparts from neighboring countries on issues related to both legal and illegal immigration. She underscored USG interest in facilitating such dialog, where we could be of assistance. DepMin Tzakri warmly welcomed our interest, pledged her cooperation on issues related to legal immigration, and offered

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her good offices with Ministry of Citizens' Protection on illegal immigration matters. She acknowledged the Consulate's natural interest in all issues affecting the 14,000 Amcits resident in Northern Greece and confirmed that her door would be open for any issue the CG needed to bring to her.

16. (SBU) ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM/DECENTRALIZATION: DepMin Tzakri stressed that the GoG was committed to uphold its pre-election pledge for "the widest possible decentralization of power." Therefore, it was only looking to handle centrally a "small core of issues" and devolve the rest to the level of Periphery (Region), Nomos (Province), and Municipality, with the aim to strengthen and upgrade governmental services at these levels. She said that new legislation currently under development will convert Thessaloniki, Athens, and other major cities to Metropolitan Centers and will grant greater autonomy to the provinces and regions (NFI). The legal committee that is drafting the final proposal to be submitted to the GoG is expected to conclude its work by early Spring 2010 with the intent being to pass the legislation well in advance of Fall elections. The second phase of new legislation, to begin after local elections have concluded, will include devolution of certain budget and tax authority from the central government to the enhanced municipal, provincial, and regional authorities.

17. (SBU) BIO NOTE: Theodora Tzakri was born in the northern town of Giannitsa (Prefecture of Pella). The 39-year old lawyer is a graduate of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and has been a Member of Parliament since 2004. In the period 2007-2009, she was a member of the all-party parliamentary Committee on Public Administration, Public Order and Justice. She also participated in the parliamentary Fact-Finding

Committee which investigated the land exchange "Vatopedi" scandal. Her critics have ridiculed her in the press for being "less-than-acceptably" articulate and "insisting on talking too much, too fast" and have posted unflattering videos of her on the internet. For the same reason, she has also been the subject of a satirical television show. Her supporters have responded that her "debatable" speaking skills should not undermine the great work she has done so far and the clear political potential they believe she has. Ms. Tzakri has rudimentary English; her listening comprehension appears stronger than her speaking ability.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite her spotty public reputation, Tzakri proved smart, knowledgeable, articulate, and professional. She was disciplined when describing both her potential portfolio and the policy initiatives still under internal GoG development, being careful not to speculate about undecided issues or to exaggerate her anticipated scope of authority. Tzakri appears to have given serious thought not just to the policy content of the reforms under consideration, but also to the operational and political aspects of their implementation. Whether she has the managerial acumen required to successfully implement all of PASOK's new initiatives in a region whose ego is still smarting from the loss of the Ministry for Macedonia and Thrace remains to be seen. But she does seem sincere in her desire to work closely and cooperatively with us on issues of mutual interest.
END COMMENT.
KAY